

Sustainable Development in Canada:

2005 Update



Making Progress Towards Sustainable Development in Canada

Canada is currently poised to enact a strategy to address climate change, as well as a host of other issues, within a context framed by the idea of sustainability. From the 1987 Montreal Protocol, to the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, and right up to Canada's recent ratification of the Kyoto Protocol, the Canadian Institute for Environmental Law and Policy (CIELAP) has provided research and recommendations on Canada's approach to this important concept of sustainable development.

As part of the lead-up to the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, CIELAP published its assessment of sustainability initiatives in Canada and recommended a four-step approach to sustainable development strategies. With the support of the Department of Foreign Affairs, CIELAP has revisited its 2001 report *Sustainable Development in Canada: A New Federal Plan* to assess subsequent overall progress on sustainable development or sustainability (we use the terms interchangeably), and to update recommendations and suggest priorities.

Why Sustainability?

Whether you are worried about the environment or are more concerned about social or economic issues, it is clear that there is a lot of potential for humans to improve their relationships with each other and with the planet. Poverty is a huge problem in our global village and even in relatively wealthy Canada; pollution is causing many types of illness from asthma to cancer; people don't have access to clean drinking water; and we are losing many of our beautiful wild places to logging, land development, and other uses. The list is long and urgent.

We now recognize that many of the problems facing our world are interconnected. Trying to fix one thing at the expense of another important issue – improving housing or economic competitiveness without regard for the environment – for example – doesn't provide lasting solutions. All the links need to be thought about at the same time. Sustainable development is the set of values, policies and tools that does just that – takes into account, equally, both people and the environment.

Though sustainable development (SD) is a responsibility shared by all actors in a society, including industry, government, other institutions and the public, in this report CIELAP focuses primarily on the federal government as well as several other efforts with impacts that are national in scope.

CIELAP's Four-Step Sustainability Strategy:

Figuring out how to make Canada's activities sustainable is a tremendous challenge. It is an ongoing, dynamic process, with major progress on some issues taking decades. And we don't always know what will work best. As with all experiments, there must be a method or process for designing initiatives, testing, reflecting on the results and changing direction when necessary. CIELAP's four-step sustainability strategy is like the scientific method for sustainable development.

Step 1: Focus on a limited list of major concerns and set long-term goals in those areas

Step 2: Set shorter-term objectives with clear time lines, implementation mechanisms and resources as interim steps toward long-term goals

Step 3: Measure and report on outcomes of sustainability initiatives, not simply identify programs and resources that contribute to sustainability goals and objectives

Step 4: Periodically stand back to evaluate feedback and assess progress based on the fundamental goals of sustainable development, and in that light revise the overall strategy as necessary

What Does Sustainable Development Mean in Practical Terms?

The most common definition of sustainable development comes from the 1987 (Brundtland) World Commission on Environment and Development report – “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” Dozens of other interpretations of the idea have been presented over the years, including the concept of the “three pillars of sustainability”:

- The **environmental** need to keep within the earth's carrying capacity
- The **economic** need to make sure that all people have adequate material living standards
- The need to have **social** structures that create and maintain values that society wishes to live by.

Most social, economic and governance activities in Canada contribute to maintaining or improving either the environment, social programs and institutions, or the economy. Few of them, however, contribute to all three. When government, businesses and industry, NGOs or community organizations create projects or policies that positively reinforce all three pillars at once, Canada can take big steps toward increasing sustainability. And evidence shows this can be done.

The Auditor General Act requires federal departments and agencies to table their own Sustainable Development Strategies in the House of Commons, and to update them every three years. The 2004 Strategies are the third such versions, and have improved considerably from earlier efforts. Two areas have emerged as requiring, and in some departments, are actually getting more attention: effective coordination mechanisms for partnerships between various federal departments and agencies; and education programs on sustainable development for all federal employees, not just those involved in creating SD Strategies.

What Progress Has Canada Made Towards Sustainability?

Internationally

- **Kyoto Protocol** – ratified by the federal government
- **Climate Change Plan** and the **One Tonne Challenge** campaign
- **Convention on Biodiversity**
- **Canadian Biodiversity Index** – now testing
- Canada participated in the 2002 **World Summit on Sustainable Development**

Within the Federal Government

- Twenty eight federal departments and agencies are required to prepare **Sustainability Development Strategies** and update them every three years; the current versions have improved, and are generally closer to CIELAP's four-step approach, discussed above.
- The **National Round Table on the Environment and the Economy** (NRTEE) undertook an Environment and Sustainable Development Indicators (ESDI) Initiative.
- The federal government is now developing **Sector Sustainability Tables** as a mechanism for industry-government-civil society collaboration.
- **Industry Canada's** Sustainable Development Strategy calls for the Department to promote innovative eco-friendly tools, practices and technologies in support of sustainable development.
- **Natural Resources Canada, Industry Canada, Environment Canada** and the **Canadian Centre for Pollution Prevention** have collaborated on projects that minimize the creation of pollutants, and foster a healthier environment and sustainable society.

Municipalities

- Individual municipalities have undertaken numerous sustainable development projects and eco-friendly initiatives, especially on climate change.
- The **Green Municipal Funds** administered by the Federation of Canadian Municipalities supports municipal government action to cut pollution, reduce greenhouse gas emissions and improve the quality of life.

Research

- Through its Centres for Innovation the **National Research Council** provides leading research in numerous areas that affect sustainable development such as Biotechnology, Fuel Cell Innovation, Environmental Technology, and Industrial Materials.

CIELAP's Recent Work on Sustainability Includes:

Sustainable Development in Canada: A New Federal Plan, 2001 - Report

Partnering for Sustainability Conference, 2002 – Proceedings

Partnerships for Sustainability, 2002 – Report

Check list for Partnerships, 2002 – Flyer

Partnering for Sustainability Conference, 2004 – Proceedings

Sustainable Development in Canada: 2005 Update – Report

Partnerships for Sustainability: A Guide to Policy for Partnerships in Canada, 2005 – Report

Partnerships for Sustainability: Developing Canada's Federal Partnerships: Policy Considerations in the Resource and Environmental Fields, 2005 – Report

Partnerships for Sustainability: How to Make a Partnership Work, 2005 – Report

Partnerships for Sustainability: Evaluating and Improving Two Partnerships, 2005 – Case Study

Partnerships for Sustainability: Getting the Most out of Partnerships, 2005 - Report

How Can Canada Approach Sustainability More Quickly and Effectively?

There has been progress on sustainability in Canada in recent years. However, we could be progressing much faster. The following are CIELAP's recommendations to the federal government for improving Canada's approach to sustainable development.

- **Demonstrate strong leadership** for sustainability at all levels, but especially at the level of the Prime Minister and Cabinet.
- Establish a mechanism or a process, determined by the government, to **set a short list of sustainability priorities**. Priority issues or themes should have:
 - Significant long-term benefits
 - Increasing long-term costs and risks if not dealt with in the present
 - Linkages to many specific issues, reinforcing positive action
 - Powerful symbolic and inspirational value inherent in at least one of the short-listed priorities.

CIELAP's short list of top priorities is:

- The Kyoto Agreement
 - Childhood poverty and deprivation, including early education and daycare
 - Cities, especially public transit and environmental infrastructure
 - "Greening" Canadian innovation and competitiveness
 - Homelessness
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- Increase accountability for effective **cooperation and coordination** among government departments and levels
 - Give all government employees **sustainability education** and experience.
 - Understand that sustainable development means much **more than sound environmental management**. Develop a useful sustainability framework for social and economic development goals as well.
 - Continue to **move from general commitments to specific objectives and programs**, especially in departmental sustainability strategies.
 - Conduct broad and ongoing **consultation** on sustainability initiatives with grassroots and community groups and other stakeholders. Provide the resources to ensure that groups are able to participate meaningfully.
 - Increase **support for sustainability information systems**. For example, support science, environment and sustainability monitoring, reporting, and systems for learning and knowledge dissemination.
 - To increase innovation and better integrate several dimensions of sustainability, undertake and support **unconventional partnerships** (for example, between different types of organizations and across disciplines and sectors).
 - Use the CIELAP **four-step strategy** and integrate it into all levels of decision-making.

CIELAP's mission is to provide leadership in the research and development of environmental law and policy that promotes the public interest and the principles of sustainability. CIELAP's vision is a world in which basic human rights include the provision of a safe and healthy environment, achieved through the respect for, and preservation of nature's integrity and diversity.

CIELAP has always taken the position that a combination of public policy and regulation, along with initiatives involving the private sector, and advocacy by non-government organizations (NGO's) representing public interest, is necessary to ensure progress towards sustainability. The protection of the public good, which cannot be left to market forces alone, is crucial if we are to achieve progress towards sustainability.

For more information on our work or on CIELAP please contact Anne Mitchell, Executive Director at 416-923-3529 ext 25. Our reports can be downloaded from our website at www.cielap.org.



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